

The Alternatives to Violence Project [AVP] began in 1975 with inmates at Green Haven Prison in New York. It was facilitated by Quakers along with Bernard Lafayette, a principle advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Since then, this secular volunteer program has completed over 15,000 three-day intensive personal transformation workshops. In 2014, there were 952 prison workshops facilitated by 1,589 inmates trained as facilitators along with 671 outside facilitators impacting 14,230 inmates in 98 prisons in 30 states. 135 community workshops, some of which included schools, youth gangs, veterans and Native Alaskans, were also done. AVP is being used in the “Recovery to Practice” SAMHSA funded program. AVP is easily replicated in many diverse settings.

AVP is used with diverse populations worldwide. In the US it is focused on prison inmates without regard to type of conviction or level of security. The effects of the program are reduced violent attitudes, reduced trait anger, improved behavior and transformed lives by improving attitudes and interpersonal skills that continue after release, and thus reduce recidivism. Because it is experiential in design, it directly accesses the subconscious parts of the brain which impacts attitudes, habits and unhealed trauma.

AVP improves attitude skills [self-awareness, empathy and personal responsibility] and interpersonal skills. Each workshop begins by creating an atmosphere of affirmation, respect and caring, which builds trust, intrapersonal and interpersonal connection and a community of safety. Then communication and cooperation skills are taught and that fosters hope and personal responsibility, which leads to personal and group transformation. When participants feel truly safe [physically and psychologically], which for some may be the first time in their lives and certainly the first time in prison, they lower their barriers and then are open to new ideas and to clearly see who they truly are and not who they have had to be due to circumstances or expectations of others. This reduces shame, increases empathy and when added to improved interpersonal skills, addresses the three causes of violent behavior [Dr. James Gilligan in “Preventing Violence”]. AVP is based on the premise that laws and structure make people conform, but connection and community empower people to transform.

AVP is a fully experiential feedback informed methodology utilizing well developed training manuals for each level; Basic, Advanced, and Training of Facilitators, as well as the Organizing Kit for new program development. One of the benefits of this methodology is its flexibility, which means facilitators are able to develop agendas that work best for their targeted group within the structural dynamics of the model. To become a facilitator, one experiences all three levels of workshop, becomes an apprentice facilitator working on teams with experienced facilitators until they develop the confidence and competence to be a full facilitator. This allows participants from the target group to be on the training team, which gives the program credibility with the participants and also gives them a sense of hope that they, too, can turn their lives around, and thus feel empowered and participate fully.